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ABSTRACT

The frequencies of specific types of verbal attractiveness stereotypes portrayed on television commercials and regular programs were determined in two studies. In the first, the 4,294 commercials aired between 8 and 10 p.m. on the 3 major networks were observed during a 7-day period in the spring of 1982. Statements related to attractiveness were recorded and coded according to nine categories: beauty, average, ugly, young, old, weight, figure, look/style, and bright. Results indicated that when all categories were combined, 25.6% of all commercials contained at least one of the attractiveness categories. Female performers and male voiceovers were far more likely to make the statements exhibiting the attractiveness categories than male performers and female voiceovers. In the second study, which focused on 150 weekly television programs, an average of 2.4 statements per hour were recorded that exhibited the attractiveness categories. Across all programming, agents of the statements were usually males, recipients of the statements were more often female than male performers, and the statements more often referred to women. Implications are that television is acting as a powerful promoter of attractiveness stereotypes. Tables show the coding system categories with examples and provide detailed study results. (LMM)

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PHYSICAL ATTRACTIVENESS STEREOTYPING ON AMERICAN TELEVISION PROGRAMS: A CONTENT ANALYSIS

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PAPER PRESENTED AT THE ANNUAL MEETING OF THE WESTERN PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION, SAN FRANCISCO, APRIL, 1983. FULL-LENGTH DRAFTS OF THIS PAPER WILL BE AVAILABLE BY SEPTEMBER 1, 1983 AND MAY BE OBTAINED BY SENDING A REQUEST TO DR. A. CHRIS DOWNS, BOX 88, PROGRAM IN HUMAN SCIENCES, UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON AT CLEAR LAKE CITY, 2700 BAY AREA BOULEVARD, HOUSTON, TEXAS 77058.

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ON A CURRENTLY-AIRED TELEVISION COMMERCIAL, A DISTINGUISHED MIDDLE-AGED WOMAN POINTS TO BROWN SPOTS ON HER HANDS AND, WITH A FAIR DEGREE OF BOTH ANGUISH AND PANIC, EXCLAIMS, "THEY CALL THESE AGE SPOTS. I CALL THEM UGLY! BUT, WHAT'S A WOMAN TO DO?" IN OTHER COMMERCIALS THE VIEWER IS INFORMED REPEATEDLY THAT ONE SIMPLY MUST HAVE THE JORDACHE LOOK, THAT ONE'S DERRIERE LOOKS GOOD ONLY IN GLORIA VANDERBILT JEANS, AND THAT TO BE EVEN 10 POUNDS OVERWEIGHT THREATENS MARRIAGES AND INVITES THE SCORN OF LITERALLY EVERYONE! IN ADDITION, FROM SIMPLE CASUAL OBSERVATIONS OF REGULARLY SCHEDULED PROGRAMMING, ONE GETS THE IMPRESSION THAT ONLY THE BEAUTIFUL CAN ATTAIN FAME AND FORTUNE ON TELEVISION.

OUR PRESENT FOCUS IS ON TELEVISION AS A SOCIALIZER OF ATTRACTIVENESS STEREOTYPES. TELEVISION IS ONLY ONE OF SEVERAL POSSIBLE SOURCES OF SUCH SOCIALIZATION. HOWEVER, THERE ARE SEVERAL STRONG REASONS TO BELIEVE THAT TELEVISION IS THE SINGLE MOST INFLUENTIAL SOCIALIZER OF ATTRACTIVENESS STEREOTYPES. FIRST, LITERALLY BILLIONS OF DOLLARS ARE SPENT ANNUALLY ON COSMETICS, PHYSICAL FITNESS AND WEIGHT REDUCTION ADVERTISING. THESE REVENUE FIGURES ALONE SUGGEST THAT TELEVISION PLAYS SOME ROLE IN ATTRACTIVENESS STEREOTYPING. SECOND, THE COSMETICS, PHYSICAL FITNESS AND WEIGHT REDUCTION INDUSTRIES ARE CURRENTLY BOOMING WHICH SUGGESTS THAT THE ADVERTISING EFFORTS WORK VERY WELL. THIRD, EARLIER RESEARCH HAS DOCUMENTED THE SALIENT ROLE OF TELEVISION IN THE DISSEMINATION OF OTHER SORTS OF STEREOTYPES SUCH AS THOSE DIRECTED AGAINST WOMEN, BLACKS, THE ELDERLY, AND SO ON. INDEED, THE UNREALISTIC PORTRAYALS AND ABSENCE OF PARTICULAR MINORITY GROUPS ON TELEVISION HAVE BEEN FREQUENTLY CITED AS IMPORTANT FACTORS IN THE MAINTENANCE OF PREJUDICE AGAINST THESE GROUPS. FOURTH, CHILDREN, AND SOMETIMES EVEN ADULTS, TEND TO BELIEVE AS REAL WHAT APPEARS

ON THE TELEVISION SCREEN AND THUS ATTRACTIVENESS STEREOTYPES MAY GO UNCHALLENGED BY THE VIEWING AUDIENCE. FINALLY, THE AVERAGE AMERICAN HOUSEHOLD WATCHES 43 HOURS OF TELEVISION PER WEEK, 6 MORE PER WEEK IF A PRESCHOOLER IS IN THE HOUSE (WINICK & WINICK, 1979)!

OVERALL, THEN, THERE ARE COMPELLING REASONS TO BELIEVE THAT TELEVISION ACTS AS A STRONG, PERHAPS EVEN PRIMARY, SOURCE OF ATTRACTIVENESS-BASED SOCIALIZATION. IRONICALLY, THERE SEEM TO BE NO PUBLISHED REPORTS OF EITHER THE FREQUENCY OR TYPE OF ATTRACTIVENESS STEREOTYPES FOUND ON AMERICAN TELEVISION.

THE RESEARCH TO BE PRESENTED HERE IS THE FIRST IN A SERIES OF STUDIES DIRECTED AT THE FREQUENCY, TYPE AND IMPACT OF TELEVISED ATTRACTIVENESS STEREOTYPES. OUR INTENT IN THE PRESENT INVESTIGATIONS WAS TO ASCERTAIN THE FREQUENCIES OF SPECIFIC TYPES OF VERBAL STEREOTYPES PORTRAYED ON COMMERCIALS AND REGULAR PROGRAMS. THE PRESENT STUDY WAS NOT DIRECTED AT THE FREQUENCIES OF ATTRACTIVE OR UNATTRACTIVE PERFORMERS ON TELEVISION. SUCH STUDY, AS WELL AS RESEARCH ON THE IMPACT OF THE STEREOTYPES ON CHILD VIEWERS, ARE CURRENTLY UNDERWAY OR ARE TO BE REPORTED ELSEWHERE.

IN THE FIRST STUDY THE 4,294 COMMERCIALS AIRED BETWEEN 8:00 A.M.-10:00 P.M. ON THE THREE MAJOR NETWORKS WERE OBSERVED DURING A 7-DAY PERIOD IN THE SPRING OF 1982. EXTENSIVE PILOT WORK LED TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF A CODING SYSTEM WITH NINE CATEGORIES. TABLE 1 SHOWS THIS CODING SYSTEM AND EXAMPLES OF EACH CATEGORY. NOTE THAT EACH CATEGORY IS EITHER DIRECTLY OR TANGENTIALLY RELATED TO CURRENT CULTURAL STEREOTYPES OF ATTRACTIVENESS. IN ORDER TO BE RECORDED THE SPECIFIC CATEGORY LABEL OR THE EXAMPLES LISTED HAD TO BE STATED IN THE CONTEXT OF AN ATTRACTIVENESS MESSAGE. FOR EXAMPLE, "IF YOU USE BRAND X YOU'LL BE BEAUTIFUL" WOULD BE SCORED UNDER THE "BEAUTY" CATEGORY; "WHAT

OLD-LOOKING SKIN" WOULD BE SCORED UNDER THE "OLD" CATEGORY, AND SO FORTH.

A TEAM OF 23 CODERS, 6 MALE, 17 FEMALE, WAS RIGOROUSLY TRAINED TO RECORD THE NINE CATEGORIES AS WELL AS THE GENDER OF THE PERFORMERS OR VOICEOVERS EXHIBITING THE CATEGORIES. ALTHOUGH THE CODERS WERE NOT NAIVE CONCERNING THE FOCUS OF THE STUDY, THE HIGHLY SPECIFIC CATEGORIES USED AND THE HIGH INTER-CODER RELIABILITIES ACHIEVED SUGGEST THAT THE OBSERVATIONS WERE PROBABLY FREE OF SYSTEMATIC BIAS. INTER-CODER RELIABILITIES RANGED FROM .71-1.00 BOTH BEFORE AND DURING DATA COLLECTION. ALL OBSERVATIONS WERE MADE INDEPENDENTLY AND DURING ACTUAL BROADCAST TIME. CODERS ALSO RECORDED THE TIME OF BROADCAST AND TYPE OF PRODUCT BEING ADVERTISED.

SEVERAL BASIC PATTERNS OF RESULTS EMERGED FROM THE CONTENT ANALYSIS. TABLE 2 SHOWS THE PERCENTAGES AND RATES OF THE ATTRACTIVENESS CATEGORIES ON THE COMMERCIALS. IN ORDER TO MAKE TABLE 2 MORE CLEAR, FIND THE LISTING OF "BEAUTY" UNDER THE HEADING OF "CATEGORY." READING ACROSS, YOU'LL NOTE THAT 9.3% OF ALL COMMERCIALS OBSERVED CONTAINED A DIRECT STATEMENT OF BEAUTY. THIS TRANSLATES INTO ONE BEAUTY STATEMENT FOR EVERY 10.8 COMMERCIALS ON TELEVISION. FURTHER, THE BEAUTY CATEGORY WAS MOST FREQUENTLY OBSERVED ON COMMERCIALS FOR, AS YOU MIGHT EXPECT, COSMETICS, PHYSICAL FITNESS, CLOTHING AND PERSONAL CARE PRODUCTS. PERUSAL OF TABLE 2 INDICATES THAT THE BEAUTY CATEGORY WAS THE MOST FREQUENT OF ALL CATEGORIES CODED. WE'D LIKE TO CALL YOUR ATTENTION TO THE FINAL ENTRY IN THE TABLE. WHEN ALL CATEGORIES ARE COMBINED, THE ANALYSES REVEALED THAT 26.5% OF ALL COMMERCIALS CONTAINED AT LEAST ONE OF THE ATTRACTIVENESS CATEGORIES. AGAIN, THIS TRANSLATES INTO A RATE OF ONE FOR EVERY 3.8 COMMERCIALS AIRED!

SINCE PARTICULAR TYPES OF COMMERCIALS APPEARED TO CONTAIN MORE ATTRACTIVENESS CATEGORIES THAN OTHERS, WE EXAMINED THE TYPES OF COMMERCIALS SHOWING

THE HIGHEST PERCENTAGES AND RATES OF ATTRACTIVENESS MESSAGES. THE RESULTS ARE SHOWN IN TABLE 3. FOR BEAUTY, FIVE DIFFERENT TYPES OF COMMERCIALS WERE MOST LIKELY TO SHOW A BEAUTY STATEMENT. NOT SURPRISINGLY, 45.5% OF COSMETICS COMMERCIALS CONTAINED A BEAUTY STATEMENT WHILE PHYSICAL FITNESS, CLOTHING AND PERSONAL CARE COMMERCIALS WEREN'T FAR BEHIND. AGAIN, WE'D LIKE TO EMPHASIZE THE RATE FIGURES. FOR THE BEAUTY CATEGORY, ONE OUT OF EVERY 2.2 COSMETICS COMMERCIALS RELAYED A BEAUTY STATEMENT. WHILE WE CANNOT EXAMINE THE RESULTS IN TABLE 3 MUCH FURTHER DUE TO TIME LIMITATIONS, IT IS INTERESTING TO NOTE THAT 38.3% OF CLOTHING COMMERCIALS STRESSED A CERTAIN LOOK OR STYLE AND 22.7% OF COSMETICS COMMERCIALS CONVEYED THE MESSAGE THAT LOOKING OLD IS TO BE AVOIDED!

TABLE 4 DISPLAYS THE PERCENTAGES AND RATES OF THE COMBINED ATTRACTIVENESS CATEGORIES BY COMMERCIAL TYPE. NOT SURPRISINGLY 100% OF WEIGHT REDUCTION AND PHYSICAL FITNESS COMMERCIALS CONTAINED AT LEAST ONE ATTRACTIVENESS CATEGORY. WHAT IS SURPRISING IS THAT 90.6% OF CLOTHING, 81.8% OF COSMETICS AND 47.8% OF PERSONAL CARE PRODUCTS COMMERCIALS CONTAINED ONE OR MORE OF THESE MESSAGES.

THE FINAL ISSUE WE WISH TO ADDRESS HERE CONCERNS THE AGENTS OF THE ATTRACTIVENESS MESSAGES. AS TABLE 5 SHOWS, FEMALE PERFORMERS AND MALE VOICEOVERS WERE FAR MORE LIKELY THAN MALE PERFORMERS OR FEMALE VOICEOVERS TO EXHIBIT THE ATTRACTIVENESS CATEGORIES.

IN THE SECOND STUDY, WE CODED 150 TELEVISION PROGRAMS SHOWN BETWEEN 8:00 A.M.-10:00 P.M. ON THE THREE MAJOR NETWORKS DURING A SEVEN-DAY PERIOD. ONLY PROGRAMS AIRED ON A WEEKLY BASIS WERE OBSERVED AND WE OMITTED ALL NEWS AND SPECIAL BROADCASTS AS WELL AS CHILDREN'S PROGRAMMING. CHILDREN'S PROGRAMS, WHILE CERTAINLY IMPORTANT, ARE THE FOCUS OF AN INVESTIGATION CURRENTLY

UNDERWAY. OVERALL, 113 HOURS OF PROGRAMMING WERE CODED. 15 TRAINED CODERS WERE INSTRUCTED TO RECORD VERBATIM ANY STATEMENT WHICH CONTAINED A REFERENCE TO BEAUTY OR ATTRACTIVENESS. CODERS ALSO RECORDED THE GENDERS OF A) THE PERFORMER MAKING THE STATEMENT, B) THE PERFORMER TO WHOM THE STATEMENT WAS DIRECTED AND C) THE PERFORMER ABOUT WHOM THE STATEMENT REFERRED. THIS WAS ACCOMPLISHED USING A SYMBOL SYSTEM DEVELOPED IN EARLIER TELEVISION WORK BY DOWNS AND GOWAN (1980). INTER-CODER RELIABILITIES WERE COMPUTED USING EXACT AGREEMENT-DISAGREEMENT FORMULAS AND WERE ABOVE .72 BOTH BEFORE AND DURING DATA COLLECTION.

THE RESULTS WERE VERY STRAIGHTFORWARD AND COMPLEMENTED THE FINDINGS FOR COMMERCIALS. THE FIRST FINDING CONCERNED THE OVERALL FREQUENCIES AND DISTRIBUTIONS OF ATTRACTIVENESS STATEMENTS. AN AVERAGE OF 2.4 SUCH STATEMENTS PER HOUR WERE RECORDED ACROSS ALL PROGRAMMING. THE VERY HIGHEST RATES OF ATTRACTIVENESS STATEMENTS WERE OBSERVED ON GAME SHOWS WITH A RATE OF 4.4 PER HOUR. BOTH SOAP OPERAS WITH 2.5 PER HOUR AND COMEDIES WITH 2.6 PER HOUR HAD FAIRLY HIGH RATES OF ATTRACTIVENESS STATEMENTS AS WELL. FINALLY, POLICE/CRIME SHOWS HAD AN AVERAGE OF 1.0 STATEMENTS PER HOUR WHILE DRAMAS HAD AN AVERAGE OF .8 PER HOUR. WHILE THESE RATES MAY SEEM LOW, IT IS IMPORTANT TO NOTE THAT DURING ONE HOUR OF BROADCAST TIME A ONE-HOUR PROGRAM IS ACTUALLY ON THE AIR FOR APPROXIMATELY 43 MINUTES DUE TO COMMERCIALS.

THE SECOND FINDING CONCERNED THE AGENTS, RECIPIENTS AND TARGETS OF THE STATEMENTS. A LARGE MAJORITY OF THE STATEMENTS WERE MADE BY MALE, RATHER THAN FEMALE, PERFORMERS. INTERESTINGLY, WHILE THE AGENTS OF THE STATEMENTS WERE USUALLY MALES, THE RECIPIENTS OF THE STATEMENTS WERE MORE OFTEN FEMALE THAN MALE PERFORMERS. FINALLY, THE TARGETS OF THE STATEMENTS, OR THE PERSONS ABOUT WHOM THE STATEMENTS REFERRED, WERE ALSO MOST OFTEN WOMEN THAN MEN.

INTERESTINGLY, WHILE THESE FINDINGS VARIED SLIGHTLY ACROSS THE TYPES OF PROGRAMS OBSERVED, THE MALE TO FEMALE ABOUT FEMALE PATTERN HELD AS GENERALLY TRUE REGARDLESS OF PROGRAM TYPE.

LET'S LOOK AT THE IMPLICATIONS OF THESE FINDINGS. FIRST, IT IS ABUNDANTLY CLEAR THAT TELEVISION IS ACTING AS A POWERFUL PROMOTER OF ATTRACTIVENESS STEREOTYPES. VIEWERS SEEM TO BE CONFRONTED WITH A DIRECT MESSAGE THAT BEAUTY IS GOOD AND IMPORTANT ON ONE OF EVERY 10.8 COMMERCIALS THEY SEE AND ON OVER TWICE EVERY HOUR ON REGULAR PROGRAMS. INDEED, THE AUDIENCE IS EXPOSED TO SOME FORM OF ATTRACTIVENESS MESSAGE ON AN EXTREMELY FREQUENT BASIS! SINCE AMERICANS WATCH INCREDIBLY HIGH AMOUNTS OF TELEVISION ON A WEEKLY BASIS, THE ARGUMENT THAT TELEVISION SERVES AS THE MOST IMPORTANT SOCIALIZER OF ATTRACTIVENESS STEREOTYPES SEEMS BOLSTERED. CERTAINLY, NO OTHER SOCIALIZATION SOURCE CONTAINS THE SHEER VOLUME OF ATTRACTIVENESS MESSAGES THAT TELEVISION DOES.

THE FINDINGS FOR THE AGENTS OF THE ATTRACTIVENESS MESSAGES WERE, QUITE FRANKLY, SHOCKING. IT IS VERY CLEAR THAT FEMALE PERFORMERS AND MALE VOICE-OVERS DELIVER THE GREATEST NUMBERS OF ATTRACTIVENESS MESSAGES ON COMMERCIALS. ON PROGRAMS, MEN MOST OFTEN MAKE THE STATEMENTS TO WOMEN ABOUT WOMEN. THESE FINDINGS COINCIDE VERY WELL WITH RECENT EVIDENCE OF A WOMEN-ATTRACTIVENESS LINK. THAT IS, MEN MORE OFTEN THAN WOMEN HOLD TO ATTRACTIVENESS STEREOTYPES, BUT MEN ALSO EXPECT THE STEREOTYPES TO BE MORE OFTEN ASSOCIATED WITH WOMEN THAN WITH MEN. IN THE PRESENT STUDIES MALE PERFORMERS ON PROGRAMS AND MALE VOICEOVERS ON COMMERCIALS WERE STATING THE STEREOTYPES. WOMEN WERE IN POSITIONS OF BEING ASSOCIATED WITH THE STEREOTYPES-- AND BY MEN! THE MESSAGE IS CLEAR THAT ATTRACTIVENESS IS MORE ASSOCIATED WITH WOMEN THAN WITH MEN AND THAT MEN ARE FORGING THIS ATTRACTIVENESS-WOMEN LINK!

THUS, ON CURRENT AMERICAN TELEVISION, IT SEEMS THAT BEING 10 POUNDS OVERWEIGHT MAY INDEED BE A FATE WORSE THAN DEATH; NOTHING ACTUALLY COMES BETWEEN ONE'S CALVIN KLEINS AND ONE'S BODY, AND OH YES, THOSE EMBARRASSING AGE SPOTS? AT LEAST FOR NOW, THEY'RE JUST WORDS FOR "UGLY."

Table 1

Coding System

Category	Examples
Beauty	beautiful, lovely, elegant, gorgeous, handsome, radiant, polished, pretty, attractive, cute, a beauty
Average	looks O.K., average appearance, average looks, nice appearance, acceptable looks, just average
Ugly	ugliness, ugly, unattractive, homely, unsightly, awful-looking, gross-looking
Young	young, look young, feel young, young-looking skin, act young
Old	old-looking skin, wrinkles, baldness, age spots, grey hair
Weight	fat, overweight, obese, thin, slim, trim, waist line
Figure/Physique	muscle-building, bigness, full-figured, bustline
Look/Style	get the Jordache look, Calvin Klein style
Bright	bright eyes, bright teeth, white teeth, bright smile

Table 2

Percentages and Rates of Attractiveness Categories on Commercials[a]

Category	Percentage of Commercials Containing This Category	Rate of Category; 1 per X number of Commercials	Category most frequently observed on these Commercials:
Beauty	9.3%	10.8	Cosmetics Phys. Fitness Clothing Personal Care
Average	0.7%	32.0	Transportation
Ugly	1.2%	81.0	Personal Care Weight reduc.
Young	1.7%	59.6	Phys. Fitness Personal Care
Old	1.6%	64.1	Cosmetics Personal Care
Weight	4.4%	22.5	Weight reduc. Phys. Fitness
Figure	2.0%	51.1	Phys. Fitness Weight reduc.
Look/Style	3.3%	30.2	Clothing
Bright	2.5%	39.4	Cosmetics Personal Care
All categories combined	26.5%	3.8	

[a] N = 4,294 commercials

Table 3

Types of Commercials Showing Highest Percentages and Rates of Attractiveness Categories

Category	Type of Commercial	Percentage of Commercials Containing this Category	Rate of Category; 1 per X Number of Commercials
Beauty	Cosmetics	45.5%	2.2
	Phys. Fitness	44.4%	2.3
	Clothing	30.9%	3.2
	Pers. Care	19.2%	5.2
	Weight reduc.	12.5%	8.0
Average	Transportation	2.0%	50.3
Ugly	Pers. Care	4.7%	21.1
	Weight reduc.	4.2%	24.0
Young	Phys. Fitness	16.7%	6.0
	Personal Care	6.1%	16.3
Old	Cosmetics	22.7%	4.4
	Personal Care	4.7%	21.1
Weight	Weight reduc.	100.0%	1.0
	Phys. Fitness	16.7%	6.0
Figure	Phys. Fitness	44.4%	2.3
	Weight reduc.	12.5%	8.0
Look/Style	Clothing	38.3%	2.6
Bright	Cosmetics	9.1%	11.0
	Personal Care	6.9%	14.6

Table 4

Percentages and Rates of All Combined Attractiveness Categories By Commercial Type

Type of Commercial	Percentage of Commercials Containing any Category	Rate of Categories; 1 per X number of Commercials
Weight Reduction	100.0%	1.0
Physical Fitness	100.0%	1.0
Clothing	90.6%	1.1
Cosmetics	81.8%	1.2
Personal Care	47.8%	2.1
Household Products	29.5%	3.4
Food & Drink	16.7%	6.0
Transportation	10.0%	10.1
Business	9.3%	10.7

Table 5

Percentages of Female and Male Performers/Voiceovers Exhibiting Each Attractiveness Category

Category	Performers			Voiceovers		
	Males		Females	Males		Females
Beauty	10.3%	<	31.7%	35.4%	>	22.6%
Average	25.0%	≅	31.3%	15.6%	<	28.1%
Ugly	20.8%	<	41.5%	30.2%	>	7.5%
Young	2.8%	<	33.3%	50.0%	>	13.9%
Old	15.9%	<	59.7%	19.4%	>	4.5%
Weight	16.8%	<	28.8%	46.1%	>	8.3%
Figure	13.1%	<	46.4%	27.4%	>	13.1%
Look/Sytle	11.3%	<	28.2%	36.6%	>	23.9%
Bright	11.9%	<	46.8%	29.4%	>	11.9%
All categories combined	11.8%	<	35.8%	35.7%	>	16.7%